



The next big thing...historians, let us all be Belgians! A few comments about Belgium's heuristic power

Pierre-Yves Saunier

► To cite this version:

Pierre-Yves Saunier. The next big thing...historians, let us all be Belgians! A few comments about Belgium's heuristic power. *Journal of Belgian History*, 2013, XLIII (4), pp.150-154. halshs-00940572

HAL Id: halshs-00940572

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00940572>

Submitted on 5 Feb 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

THE NEXT BIG THING : HISTORIANS, LET US ALL BE BELGIANS !

A few comments about Belgium's heuristic power.

There is not one ounce of irony in that title. I am not suggesting that historians of all countries should unite and apply for naturalisation in a country which dis-integration is feared by some and called for by others. No hint, neither, to famous quotes in speeches and allocutions by major historical characters. Nor do I wish we all become historians of Belgium, although it would not hurt. Behind the joke is an invitation to take on board the kind of bet that has been extended by the editors of the *Beyond Belgium* special issue, and accepted by its contributors: I support the idea that doing history with Belgium would be a benefit for us all historians, under different fashions.

In this brief commentary, I will follow their lead and put Belgium to work.

To tell the truth, it is just fair to do so, because Belgium put me to work in the past. It is directly connected to the stream of my own work that can be described as researching, writing and teaching history in a transnational perspective. And I suspect that it is partly under the spell of Belgium that this stream came into being, since these days in the mid-1990s when I began to explore flows and ties among and about European municipalities in the 19th and 20th century.¹ This history involved many things that 'had a presence in Belgium' as mentioned by the special issue editors in their introduction Belgian individuals, Belgian sites, Belgians institutions and organisations located in Belgium. In order to understand the context where they operated I had to pay interest to the history of Belgium. But above all, if I wanted to capture the circuits of information, power, knowledge, people and their impact in the different locales they included on different continents and in different countries, this history had to be written with Belgium and not as a series of bilateral or multilateral relations between cities. It was with Belgium that the specific order of circulations and relations in the municipal could be excoriated. Beyond this incorporation of Belgium into the territory of my work, this led me to experience and ponder the heuristic power of Belgium as a tool for the historian's craft. It is this aspect that comes to my mind at the moment when I am invited to comment on the contributions in *Beyond Belgium*. This special issue beautifully stages this heuristic

¹ Pierre-Yves SAUNIER, "Changing the city: urban international information and the Lyon municipality, 1900-1940", in *Planning perspectives*, t.14, 1999, 1, p.19-48.

power and its effectiveness in many directions. But commentaries, to be true to their name, should be short. Accordingly I have just selected three directions among the bunch of possibilities graciously suggested by our team of editors and contributors.

Firstly, doing history with Belgium is a spur in methodological terms. This aspect can be enhanced in many different ways, but I am inclined to choose a couple that deal with the way our sense of spatiality is tested when doing history in a transnational perspective. Several contributors in the issue insist that reconstructing entanglements and intersections among societies and polities in *Belle Epoque* Europe, starting from Belgian protagonists, eventually leads to work through what we usually consider as 'levels' or 'scales', nested into one another by hierarchical relationships, with historical actors moving 'from' one 'to' the other 'below' or 'under'. The local, the national, the global; the city, the region, the country, the continent, the oceanic rim, the planet. Whereas, whether they were keen to claim the vigour of a city and region through exhibitions, to establish the definition and reputation of a national style of medicine or history, to develop the institutions and activities of women, workers or freethinkers groups or to nurture plans for world capitals, historical protagonists whom we meet in beyond Belgium were in fact simultaneously operating across and through these scales. They mustered practical and rhetorical resources that drew on these different levels, and developed practices that straddled across several of these planes. Not indiscriminately, but in accordance to the expected effectiveness of these locations. In their hands, and in their words, scales were tools that were used to justify a position or an idea, or to subvert a situation, or to create an institution.

Besides, they did not merely cope with existing levels, but they made scales: on the banks of the Congo river, Belgian doctors created a spatial level of their own which included their French counterparts cross the river, sleeping sickness stricken inhabitants of the Congo basin, flies and parazoa in sub-Saharan Africa, financial partners as well as German drugs laboratories and tropical medicine schemes entertained in the British world. These levels were intertwined in their daily activities, and their 'local' was not the narrow, permanent and contiguous territory that we associate with the name. In order to capture their activity and resources, it is a wide, transient and un-contiguous space that needs to be considered. Not the way we are used to think of our research space, though, but quite a demonstration of the strain to be

faced when one decides to follow flows, ties and relations where they lead us.² This is, I believe, a second aspect where our sense of spatiality is unsettled by doing history with Belgium. Mapping and charting flows, ties and relations that shaped and were shaped by Belgian protagonists does indeed lead contributors of *Beyond Belgium* to include places and regions that are, geographically or politically speaking, expected to have connections with Belgium: the cities across the Dutch border, the German workers' movement, French women's activists, French and German historians, the Free State of Congo. But it is also split, distant and unstable spaces that they work with: the divided spheres of freemasonry, the competing but intertwined genealogies of currents and schools in feminism and the social sciences, the twisted channels of intellectual disciplinary affiliations, the 'moral empire' of American reformers and its feelers in the field of international arbitration, the rivalry of cities and sites under consideration for the creation of a 'word capital'. Doing history with Belgium leads us into different landscapes of connections, circulations and relations than the familiar bilateral pairs historians have abundantly studied (France/England, China/Japan, Germany/England, India/England, Mexico/United States). It invites historians to reconstruct the complete international political economy of flows and ties, and to reconstruct the orders that presided to such arrangements. This has, so far, been the work of major synthetic essays, such as Eric Hobsbawm's tetralogy or the history of the world being co-published by Beck and Harvard University Press.³ The Belgian tree, or hub, or station, invites us to develop views of the forest, or circuit, or network based on first hand research. Choose your metaphor.

² More on this in Richard WHITE, "The Nationalization of Nature", in *The Journal of American History*, t.86, 1999, 3, p. 976–86; Matthias MIDDELL and Katja NAUMANN, "Global History and the Spatial Turn: from the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization", in *Journal of Global History*, t.5, 2010, 1, p.149–170; Michael G. MÜLLER and Cornelius TORP, "Conceptualising Transnational Spaces in History", in *European Review of History*, t. 16, 2009, 5, p. 609–617.

³ Eric J. HOBBSBAWM, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson (1962), *The Age of Capital: 1848–1875*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975, *The Age of Empire: 1875–1914*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987, *The Age of Extremes: the Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London, Michael Joseph, 1994 ; Emily ROSENBERG, ed. *A History of the World: A World Connecting, 1870-1945*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 2012

This compelling capacity does not, I argue, merely derives from the fact that Belgium would be a 'mini-Europe' and as such, could be used as a 'test-case'. It is us who are put to test by Belgium, and not the opposite. This should not be obliterated by the capacity of Belgian institutions and individuals to stage Belgium as the country best suited to international undertakings. *Beyond Belgium* allows us to dissipate the effects of a spell that was cast long ago. Several of its contributors decipher the performances that installed the 'cross roads' trope in widely held representations and practices of Belgium, both at home and abroad. They excoriate performances by famous Belgians like Adophe Quetelet, Henri La Fontaine, Paul Otlet or Henri Pirenne but also by a whole range of not so famous Belgians such as Antoine Wiertz who was among the first, possibly as soon as 1842, to broach into the theme of 'Brussels capital of Europe'.⁴ This was completed by the works of non Belgians who found advantage in locating activities in one of the European 'small countries'.

It is not because turn of the century Belgium was a small, bilingual and young country that European historians –and others, can learn from it. Nor because of an 'international vocation'. Rather, the heuristic capacity of Belgium is an outcome of all the discourse, practices and usages that have associated Belgium with these characteristics: such associations enhance some patterns and processes that are more difficult to see elsewhere. Doing history with Belgium, reading Belgian history, collaborating with Belgian historians makes it easier to see how deep and far the foreign runs into the domestic, and vice versa, in the fabric or local, regional and national societies and communities. This line of thought would need more space than this commentary can afford, but I claim that it is difficult for historians of 'big countries' to acknowledge the blurriness of this line between the domestic and the foreign, if only because of the thick layers of nationalization that have covered the traces left by past promiscuities between national states and foreign contributions. The tropes of 'crossroad' and 'mini-Europe' rip open the multiple relationships of alignment, rejection, imitation, mobilisation and others that historians of Germany, France or England usually capture under the notions of 'influence', and later 'transfer', which are more than often reconnected to another 'big country'. *Beyond Belgium*, as a demonstration project of how much the Belgian civil

⁴ quoted in Daniel LAQUA, *European Internationalism(s), 1880-1930: Brussels as a Centre for Transnational Cooperation*, Ph.D thesis, University College of London, 2008.

society or institutional fabric owes to entanglements with distant and distinct places, is an for historians of other countries to look for homologous motifs.

Likewise, although on a larger plane, doing history with Belgium would help to push aside another roadblock. European history of the 19th and 20th century, according to many a book or article that carry that tag, is still very much a mix of English, French and German history, with crispy Italian croutons and true flakes of Austrian history when the cook was in a good mood. Only a few research monographs or synthetic textbooks would try other recipes. This may have been one product of the 're-nationalisation' of historical narratives in Europe after the second World War, at a stage where European history 'served a stabilizing function in the intellectual life of European nation-states', as noted by Stefan Berger.⁵ In recent years, with the inroads made global, connected, or transnational approaches, the history of Europe may have increasingly become more than the history of European states writ large once indicted by Stuart Woolf's.⁶ Works such as *Beyond Belgium* can contribute that it also continues to evolve as more than the history of entanglements between European big countries writ large.

The third thing to be gained from a history with Belgium relates to the notion of internationalism. *Beyond Belgium* can help us to complete an ongoing move. Not unlike nationalism, which in chorus the participants to this special issue underline as not having been internationalism's opposite for many Belle Epoque protagonists, internationalism has long been studied as a an idea, a cause, a worldview, an organizational set-up. Contributions in *Beyond Belgium*, instead, locate it into a number of habits and practices: publishing in foreign journals, visiting or reading about foreign social experiments in cities across the borders, raising funds to build a monument for a Spanish freethinker martyr, organising associations and bureaux with members and activities in different countries, sending drugs abroad for testing. More could be added from the domains that *Beyond Belgium* had no space to address (migrations, trade, investment, consumption). These practices were daily routine for many actors and it did not always signify an affiliation to internationalism as a project for peace, arbitration

⁵ Stefan BERGER, "A Return to the National Paradigm? National History Writing in Germany, Italy, France, and Britain from 1945 to the Present" in *The Journal of Modern History*, t. 77, 2005, 3, p. 629-678.

⁶ Stuart WOOLF, "Europe and its historians", in *Contemporary European History*, t.12, 2003, 3, p.323-337.

and mutual understanding, or as an horizon for a world polity that would supersede national states or local societies. Authors in *Beyond Belgium*, to my eyes, are doing to internationalism what Michael Billig did for nationalism: they call our attention to ‘banal internationalism’.⁷ Banal internationalism, here, points to the manifold practices of everyday life that installed and reproduced ties, flows and links across borders and the spatial and social formations that they created. From that point of view, banal internationalism is not a kind of minor or major utopia, but what individuals did through and between polities and societies, chiefly but not only polities and societies defined in national terms. And they did it at the same time that they also ran routines that installed and reproduced other types of imagined communities, from the nation to the social group or the religious community of believers. If we write history with Belgium, then the story of internationalism is not the usual narrative of the wax and wane of a noble but weak chimera to prevent war, nor even the history of concerted efforts to create rule for the world through international organizations. It is a story of practices, their operation, their incorporation into habits and outlooks. *Beyond Belgium* is certainly not the first instance where this is suggested. Historians have been studying banal internationalism in economic, social, cultural and material terms for decades. But this was somehow obscured by the debate around the hierarchy of allegiance between nationalism and internationalism, and its inevitable conclusion that nationalism had won in every occasion (the crucial point of the demonstration being the First World War). More than often, paying attention to the practices of internationalism was, ultimately, an attempt to validate or invalidate internationalism as an idea, a cause or a project. *Beyond Belgium* goes way beyond this, and take these practices seriously.

In 2005 and in that very journal, Patrick Pasture noticed that the history of Belgium was not very commonly practiced outside of Belgium, and that even fewer historians studied Belgium as a case to highlight major historical issues and processes.⁸ *Beyond Belgium* is not trying to redress this situation, but redefines the terms of the question: it is not a “small state by the North Sea” that they urge foreign historians to consider, but an

⁷ Michael BILLIG, *Banal nationalism*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 1995.

⁸ Patrick PASTURE, “Views from Abroad. Foreign Historians on a Small State by the North Sea. With Reflections on Historical Writing in Belgium and Elsewhere”, in *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire* 35, 2005, 4, p.413-433.

epitome of the history of entanglements in the modern world. That should not lead to more chairs in the history of Belgium abroad, but it has the drive to make history with Belgium into something familiar to many foreign historians.

Pierre-Yves Saunier